

Credit Level Descriptors for Higher Education

May 2021

This edition of the **seec** credit level descriptors updates the context for their use to reflect changes in the sector since they last underwent review in 2016.

They are provided free to those who may find them of use. We would request that, where appropriate, you acknowledge their source as:

seec (2021) Credit Level Descriptors for Higher Education, available at www.seec.org.uk

We would welcome examples of their use and comments on their content and structure. You can contact us via our website where you will find resources to support their use.

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Definition and context

What are credit level descriptors?

Credit level descriptors define the level of challenge, complexity, and autonomy expected of a learner on completion of a defined and bounded learning activity such as a module¹ or programme of learning. They provide a description of increasing levels of learning (from level 3 to level 8) categorised in relation to knowledge, understanding, skills, behaviours and values. As such they represent one articulation of the expected learning gain of learners as they progress through higher education.

Credit level descriptors are a useful reference point for anyone with a responsibility for benchmarking, contextualising and credit-rating learning, whether this learning derives from within or without a formal curriculum. Their considered use aids consistency and transparency of expectations and outcomes for all parties: higher education providers, practitioners, employers, professional bodies and learners.

External reference points

The following provide key reference points and context for the descriptors:

- The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (November 2014), available at www.qaa.ac.uk
- The Higher Education Credit Framework for England (2021), available at www.qaa.ac.uk
- Moves towards the harmonisation of definitions and the use of credit across Europe (see A Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (available at www.ehea.info) and through revisions to the European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System, see for example the ECTS User Guide 2015, available at www.ec.europa.eu
- The Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) (further information available at www.gov.uk)
- Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (2016), available at www.gov.wales
- The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (see SCQF Handbook, volumes 1 and 2, available at www.scqf.org.uk)
- Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) Apprenticeship Standard Occupational Level Guide, available at <https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org>
- The Common Microcredential Framework (CMF), available at <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/the-common-microcredential-framework>
- In addition to the above reference points, the descriptors reflect and may be used in conjunction with different professional body standards or frameworks

Relationship to the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications

The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (FHEQ) (UK Quality Code for Higher Education, 2018) defines the learning standards expectations for a range of nationally recognised higher education qualifications, such as certificates of Higher Education, Diplomas of Higher Education, Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral degrees. The FHEQ is, as such, a set of 'qualification descriptors', which define learning expectations at the terminal qualification only. For example, a Bachelors degree qualification descriptor will describe learning expectations at level 6 but not at levels 4 and 5. The essential difference between qualification descriptors and credit levels descriptors is that the former relate to whole qualifications, covering one or more academic level. seec credit level descriptors are more detailed and focus on the characteristics and context of learning expected at each higher education 'level' rather than qualification type.

01. The term 'module' is used in this document to indicate any method of organisation of learning; institutions may have their own term such as 'unit'.

A specific qualification will normally consist of a range of modules at one or more academic level with combined credit volumes appropriate to that qualification. Individual institutions may also define the volume and nature of the credit required at each academic level within the overall expectations of the FHEQ. For example, some institutions allow the use of a limited amount of level 6 credit (final year undergraduate) to count towards a level 7 (Master's) award. A focus on the learning expectations of qualifications does not, in itself, provide a benchmark for learning that precedes the terminal qualification. However, when designing programmes and modules that lead to qualifications it is clearly important that the expectations of learning as outlined in qualification descriptors and level descriptors are aligned.

Relationship with the Higher Education Credit Framework

The Higher Education Credit Framework for England (HECF) (QAA, 2021) provides enabling and directive, rather than prescriptive, guidance for higher education providers on the use of credit across a range of contexts from micro-credentials to postgraduate research degrees and from the recognition of prior learning to degree apprenticeships. The HECF is intended to compliment and reflect the learning expectations described within the FHEQ and presents 'guiding principles' of clarity, consistency, mobility and creativity designed to provide a reference point for consideration by providers developing new or reviewing existing provision. While the HECF describes examples regarding the use of credit to provide a consistent structuring mechanism that underpins the flexible and innovative higher education provision, credit level descriptors:

"provide more detailed descriptions of the learning at each level and deliver a structure for credit accumulation and transfer... Written as generic statements used to determine the demand, complexity, depth and learner autonomy associated with a specific level of learning and achievement... they also link with academic, vocational or professional practice and detail the range and sophistication of the application of knowledge/skills to practice" (QAA, 2021).

How are credit level descriptors used?

The principal uses of the **seec** credit level descriptors are to:

- a. guide the assignment of credit through the writing of learning outcomes,
- b. inform curriculum design,
- c. assist in writing assessment criteria and the setting of standards,
- d. support the recognition of prior learning,
- e. assist with the recognition of learning in work contexts,
- f. assist in the setting of levels of occupational and professional competence in the development of apprenticeship standards,
- g. aid the clear communication of learning expectations,
- h. support the development of professional frameworks,
- i. support the development of microcredentials.
- j. support staff development,

A. The assignment of credit and the writing of learning outcomes

A key purpose of the **seec** credit level descriptors is to help assign the appropriate higher education level to an identified and bounded learning activity such as a programme module. In addition to other relevant benchmarks informing the volume or amount of credit assigned, the credit level descriptors are typically used by module designers to help write learning outcomes, which clearly articulate the level of learning expected. Individual learning outcomes within a module may span a range of related levels but, overall, the outcomes should clearly locate the module at a particular level. Only one level can be assigned to any given module. When the module forms part of a larger programme of learning, it should be located at the appropriate level for that module irrespective of the overall level of the ultimate award.

Since the credit level descriptors are 'generic' or 'transdisciplinary' and not 'subject', work or practice area specific, when credit level descriptors are used to inform the development of learning outcomes for subject/work/practice specific programmes and/or modules, the programme or module designers need to translate them into learning outcomes that identify the subject/work/practice specific requirements of a programme of study.

B. Curriculum design

The **seec** credit level descriptors can be used in a number of ways to help aid effective curriculum design. They can:

- Provide a means to identify the challenge, complexity, depth of learning and degree of learner autonomy expected at each level of a programme of study.
- Provide a means of establishing that there is broad coverage of the various aspects of learning described by the credit level descriptors across a programme of study. Whilst programmes may not cover all aspects of the level descriptors, there is often a need to ensure that a breadth and balance of skills development is demonstrated. This is particularly the case where a programme of study leads to a qualification that corresponds to the total amount of credit normally achieved within a specific level. For example, 120 credits at levels 4, 5 and 6; and 180 credits at level 7.
- Help to inform the process of writing learning outcomes so that they are produced in a way that supports learner progression through a course of study.
- Help establish broad comparisons across subject/work/practice areas facilitating credit accumulation and transfer schemes, the design of joint and combined awards and the sharing of modules between programmes.

C. Assessment criteria and the setting of standards

The **seec** credit level descriptors provide a useful benchmark indicator of the learning outcomes expected at each level and may be used as the basis for judgements about the standard of learning required for specific programme modules and their associated assessment. Thus, they can assist tutors, external examiners and validation and approval panels in their various roles in the standard setting process.

D. The recognition of prior learning

The **seec** credit level descriptors are useful in processing the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). They provide a reference point for ascribing credit to 'certificated learning' which has not been credit rated, and they enable learners and tutors to identify the appropriate level at which prior 'experiential learning' can be recognised for the award of credit.

E. Recognition of work-based learning

The **seec** credit level descriptors can assist with identifying the level of learning derived from the workplace (formal/informal, employed or voluntary) as part of formal work-based or work-integrated learning programmes, including apprenticeships. Unlike prior experiential learning, work-based learning is concurrent and integrated with study. Assessment is normally derived from evidence of learning generated from work and the **seec** credit level descriptors can inform judgements about the level of the learning achievement demonstrated.

F. Developing apprenticeship standards

The **seec** credit level descriptors can be used as a benchmark for establishing the occupational or professional competence level required by a relevant job role, in the process of developing an apprenticeship standard. All apprenticeships in England, require that a specific occupational level is determined for each apprenticeship standard. The levels required align to those used with the FHEQ and within the HEFC. Where available, apprenticeships should also align with levels of professional recognition and in regulated and statutory professions, this is a requirement. This presents an opportunity to align higher education qualification, professional and apprenticeship standard levels, which can support the development of greater clarity regarding career progression opportunities. Apprenticeship standards are also described in terms of required 'knowledge', 'skills' and 'behaviours', which constitute learning outcomes for apprenticeship programmes. The **seec** credit level descriptors can be used as a reference for the writing of knowledge, skills and behaviours towards consistency of language for specific apprenticeship standard occupational/professional levels.

G. Communicating expectations to learners

Whilst the **seec** credit level descriptors have been primarily designed to help programme and module designers and inform quality assurance processes, they can also be used to help articulate to learners the outcomes expected of their learning and how this should develop as they progress with their studies. Learners however may need help and guidance in interpreting what is intended by the language of the descriptors.

H. The development of professional frameworks

The **seec** credit level descriptors can be used as a valuable reference for professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) where they are seeking to align professional recognition, status or qualification with higher education levels. This can include the development of professional standards and/or competence frameworks as well as standardised approaches to the recognition of prior learning within specific professional contexts.

I. Microcredentials

The **seec** credit level descriptors can be used to support the development of microcredentials that align to the requirements of the Common Microcredential Framework (CMF) including programme and module design and the writing of learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

J. Staff development

The **seec** credit level descriptors can be used to inform different types of staff development related to the functions described above, including course and module design, writing learning outcomes and assessment criteria, and the recognition of prior learning. The **seec** credit level descriptors can be used to inform staff development for employer teams who are supporting learning in the workplace.

Principles underpinning the use of the descriptors

The following general principles underpin the intended use of the **seec** credit level descriptors:

- i. The descriptors are designed to assist with the assignment of credit to elements of learning and the structuring of learning opportunities within programmes of study. They are not intended to replace qualifications descriptors but are aligned with the FHEQ and HECF.
- ii. The descriptors provide an indicative benchmark for credit-rating and level setting and are not intended to be all-encompassing or prescriptive in nature.
- iii. It is acknowledged that the 'assignment of credit' and 'credit-rating' also requires the volume of credit to be benchmarked, as well as the level.
- iv. The descriptors are generic or transdisciplinary by design and can encompass learning in most learning, work and practice contexts,
- v. Programmes and modules in different learning, work and practice areas will emphasise different aspects of the descriptors,
- vi. The descriptors define learning positively and imply that learning is demonstrated 'effectively' in relation to specific learning, work and practice contexts,
- vii. The descriptors provide a benchmark for the level of learning, but it is not intended that all of the descriptors at a particular level necessarily need to be met for the learning to be ascribed to that level,
- viii. Higher-level descriptors subsume the descriptors at lower levels,
- ix. The language of the descriptors has been kept simple wherever possible and the descriptors make consistent use of terminology at each level,
- x. The descriptors are intended to be used and adapted by higher education providers, practitioners, employers and learners to suit their own development purposes.

The seec descriptors

Format and structure

There are many ways in which learning can be described and categorised. The format adopted by the **seec** credit level descriptors reflects the nature of learning commonly recognised by **seec** members in a variety of learning situations and across a range of learning, work and practice areas.

The **seec** credit level descriptors are not meant to be prescriptive or limiting, nor devalue aspects that might be relevant to particular subjects and/or practice contexts but which are not strongly reflected in the descriptors. Rather, the intention is to define a set of knowledge, understanding, skills, behaviours and values, that can act as a guide for practitioners and others seeking to define or recognise learning and ascribe it to a particular academic level.

The level descriptors are designed to help assign credit to higher education-level learning defined by the FHEQ and HECEP as levels 4 through to 8. However, to provide a context for the consideration of progression to higher education levels, the **seec** credit level descriptors also include level 3.

In order to support their use in a variety of contexts, the descriptors are set out in two different formats: by level, showing all categories at a specific level; and by category, showing comparative learning expectations across levels. The descriptors themselves are identical in both formats.

The descriptors are grouped under five main categories, each of which have one or more sub-categories used to progressively describe a specific aspect of learning from level 3 to level 8. The descriptors are constructed on the basis that each of these aspects of learning can be evidenced (in different ways) at all levels.

Setting

- Operational context
- Autonomy and responsibility for actions

The context in which learning takes place and the autonomy expected of the learner is an important aspect of defining the level at which learning is taking place. These two descriptors describe how complexity and autonomy increase with level. The setting in which a learner is operating is particularly important in interpreting other descriptors which is why this dimension is highlighted first.

Application of knowledge and understanding

- Knowledge and understanding

These descriptors describe the ability to apply growing levels of understanding of relevant areas of knowledge of increasing depth and complexity. This ranges from the application of pre-defined areas of knowledge in familiar contexts through to a comprehensive understanding at the forefront of the discipline to drive the production of new knowledge. The application of knowledge and understanding provide the basis for the development of many of the other skills and attributes in the descriptors.

Cognitive skills

- Conceptualisation and critical thinking
- Problem solving and enquiry
- Synthesis and creativity
- Analysis and evaluation

These descriptors capture the developing cognitive skills which are expected of learners as they progress and engage with learning, work or practice contexts of increasing complexity. They range from the application of pre-defined principles, concepts, skills and techniques in familiar contexts through to the development of highly advanced and innovative strategies and methodologies in highly complex and abstract contexts. It is recognised that the organisation of the descriptors into these specific cognitive skill categories is contestable and that subject, work and practice contexts can lead to different nomenclature, groupings and prioritisation. It is also the case that these descriptors are to a degree inter-related and users may wish to develop their own categorisation using those provided as a reference point.

Practical skills

- Organisation and communication of information
- Interpersonal, team and networking skills
- Project and activity design and development skills

These descriptors capture the developing practical skills that are expected of learners as they progress and engage with learning, work or practice contexts of increasing complexity. They are all potentially related to any subject, work or practice context and will be particularly applicable to contexts that require learners to engage with applied and/or practice-based learning. They range from the application of pre-defined skills and criteria in familiar contexts through to the development of highly advanced and specialist skills that transform professional practice. It is recognised that the organisation of the descriptors into these specific practical categories is contestable and that subject, work and practice contexts can lead to different nomenclature, groupings and prioritisation. It is also the case that these descriptors are to a degree inter-related and users may wish to develop their own categorisation using those provided as a reference point.

Behaviours and values

- Ethical awareness and application
- Personal responsibility and leadership

These descriptors capture the developing and, in some cases, required behaviours and values that are expected of learners as they progress. Learners are increasingly required to engage with ethical contexts across subject, work or practice areas and to be able to demonstrate increasing responsibility for the development of their own and others capabilities. They are potentially applicable to any subject, work or practice context as they underpin the development of other aspects of learning and will be particularly applicable to contexts that require learners to demonstrate required occupational or professional behaviours and values. They range from taking responsibility for the application of pre-defined criteria in familiar contexts through to integrating transformative leadership approaches as an accountable aspect of professional practice.

Further information

Further information on level descriptors and their use can be found on the **seec** web site (www.seec.org.uk).

seec descriptors by level

seec descriptors: by level

Level 3

Summary credit level descriptor

Applies an understanding of pre-defined areas of knowledge and skills in familiar learning, work or practice contexts. Acts largely under direction; working within pre-defined guidelines and using predefined techniques. Takes responsibility for initiating and completing tasks as well as the evaluation of own capabilities. Uses pre-defined principles to analyse, evaluate, organise and communicate information. Develops projects and/or activities to support own and/or others learning, work or practice.

Setting

Operational context	Operates in familiar learning, work or practice contexts that require the use of pre-defined techniques and information sources.
Autonomy and responsibility for actions	Acts largely under direction, within pre-defined guidelines, taking responsibility for initiating and completing tasks and procedures in familiar contexts.

Application of knowledge and understanding

Knowledge and understanding	Applies an understanding of pre-defined areas of knowledge and an awareness of theories, ideas, concepts and related debates in familiar contexts.
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Cognitive skills

Conceptualisation and critical thinking	Identifies and applies pre-defined principles, concepts, theoretical frameworks and approaches in familiar contexts.
Problem solving and enquiry	Applies pre-defined problem-solving techniques to investigate given problems using information and data in familiar contexts.
Synthesis and creativity	Synthesises information and ideas and formulates creative proposals to address pre-defined issues or opportunities in familiar contexts.
Analysis and evaluation	Analyses and evaluates the relevance of information and data using predefined principles, frameworks, criteria and techniques in familiar contexts.

Practical skills

Organisation and communication of information	Organises and communicates information, using predefined criteria, to audiences in familiar contexts.
Interpersonal, team and networking skills	Applies pre-defined interpersonal, team and networking skills to support team performance in familiar contexts.
Project and activity design and development skills	Designs and develops projects and/or activities using pre-defined criteria to support own and/or others learning, work or practice in familiar contexts.

Behaviours and values

Ethical awareness and application	Applies an awareness of pre-defined ethical values and issues to personal decisions and actions in familiar contexts.
Personal responsibility and leadership	Takes responsibility for the evaluation of own capabilities using pre-defined criteria in familiar contexts.

seec descriptors: by level

Level 4

Summary credit level descriptor

Applies an understanding of established areas of knowledge and skills in familiar and unfamiliar learning, work or practice contexts. Acts with support and uses techniques within established guidelines. Takes responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs and the evaluation of own capabilities and development. Uses established principles to analyse, evaluate, organise and communicate the relevance and significance of information. Develops projects and/or activities to inform own and/or others learning, work or practice.

Setting

Operational context	Operates in familiar and unfamiliar learning, work or practice contexts that require the use of established techniques and information sources.
Autonomy and responsibility for actions	Acts with support within established guidelines and takes responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.

Application of knowledge and understanding

Knowledge and understanding	Applies an understanding of established areas of knowledge and an appreciation of where theories, ideas and concepts are open to ongoing debate and reformulation in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.
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Cognitive skills

Conceptualisation and critical thinking	Identifies and applies established principles, concepts, theoretical frameworks and approaches, recognising their relative strengths in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.
Problem solving and enquiry	Applies established problem-solving methods and techniques to recognise and investigate problems, using information and data in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.
Synthesis and creativity	Synthesises information and ideas and formulates creative proposals to address established issues or opportunities in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.
Analysis and evaluation	Analyses and evaluates the relevance and significance of information and data using established principles, frameworks, criteria and techniques in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.

Practical skills

Organisation and communication of information	Organises and communicates information, using established criteria, to audiences in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.
Interpersonal, team and networking skills	Applies established interpersonal, team and networking skills to recognise factors that affect team performance in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.
Project and activity design and development skills	Designs and develops projects and/or activities using established criteria to inform own and/or others learning. Work or practice in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.

Behaviours and values

Ethical awareness and application	Applies an awareness of established ethical values and issues to personal decisions, actions and responsibilities in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.
Personal responsibility and leadership	Takes responsibility for the evaluation of own capabilities and development using established criteria in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.

seec descriptors: by level

Level 5

Summary credit level descriptor

Applies an understanding of wide-ranging areas of knowledge and a range of relevant skills in learning, work or practice contexts of varying complexity. Acts with partial self-direction and works within relevant guidelines using a wide range of techniques. Takes responsibility for achieving personal and/or group outcomes/outputs and evaluates own capabilities and development using relevant criteria. Uses a range of principles to analyse, evaluate, organise and communicate the reliability and validity of a variety of information sources. Develops a range of relevant projects and/or activities to improve areas of own and/or others learning, work or practice.

Setting

Operational context	Operates in learning, work or practice contexts of varying complexity requiring the application of a wide range of techniques and information sources.
Autonomy and responsibility for actions	Acts with partial self-direction within relevant guidelines and accepts responsibility for achieving personal and/or group outcomes/outputs in wide-ranging contexts of varying complexity.

Application of knowledge and understanding

Knowledge and understanding	Applies an understanding of wide-ranging areas of knowledge, recognising those areas where theories, ideas and concepts are most/least secure in contexts of varying complexity.
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Cognitive skills

Conceptualisation and critical thinking	Identifies and applies a range of relevant principles, concepts, theoretical frameworks and approaches recognising competing perspectives in contexts of varying complexity.
Problem solving and enquiry	Applies a range of relevant problem-solving methods and techniques to define and investigate problems, patterns and relationships using information and data in contexts of varying complexity.
Synthesis and creativity	Synthesises information and ideas and formulates creative proposals to address a range of issues or opportunities in contexts of varying complexity.
Analysis and evaluation	Analyses and evaluates the reliability and validity of a variety of information and data sources, using and comparing a range of principles, frameworks, criteria and techniques in contexts of varying complexity.

Practical skills

Organisation and communication of information	Organises and communicates information, using a range of relevant criteria, to a variety of audiences in contexts of varying complexity.
Interpersonal, team and networking skills	Applies a range of relevant interpersonal, team and networking skills to contribute to the enhancement of team performance in contexts of varying complexity.
Project and activity design and development skills	Designs and develops a range of relevant projects and/or activities to improve areas of own and/or others learning, work or practice of varying complexity.

Behaviours and values

Ethical awareness and application	Applies an awareness of a range of relevant ethical and professional values and codes of conduct to personal and/or group decisions, actions, responsibilities and outcomes in contexts of varying complexity.
Personal responsibility and leadership	Takes responsibility for the evaluation of own and/or others' capabilities and development using wide-ranging approaches and criteria in contexts of varying complexity.

seec descriptors: by level

Level 6

Summary credit level descriptor

Applies an in-depth understanding of areas of knowledge and relevant selected specialist skills in complex and interrelated learning, work or practice contexts. Acts autonomously and works within relevant self-selected guidelines using specialist techniques. Takes responsibility for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes and for the critical evaluation of own and others' capabilities and development. Selects relevant specialist strategies and principles to analyse, evaluate, organise and communicate the significance of information and data in complex contexts. Designs and develops specialist projects and/or activities to enhance inter-related areas of own and/or others learning.

Setting

Operational context	Operates in complex and inter-related learning, work or practice contexts, requiring selection and application of relevant specialist techniques and information sources.
Autonomy and responsibility for actions	Acts autonomously within relevant self-selected guidelines, taking responsibility for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes in complex and inter-related contexts.

Application of knowledge and understanding

Knowledge and understanding	Applies an in-depth understanding of knowledge, selecting relevant and specialist theories, ideas, conceptual frameworks and methods in complex and inter-related contexts.
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Cognitive skills

Conceptualisation and critical thinking	Selects and applies relevant specialist principles concepts, theoretical frameworks and approaches from competing perspectives and critically identifies the possibility of new ideas in complex and inter-related contexts.
Problem solving and enquiry	Selects and applies specialist problem-solving strategies, methods and techniques to define, investigate and critically evaluate problems using information and data in complex and inter-related contexts.
Synthesis and creativity	Synthesises specialist and inter-related information and ideas and formulates and develops creative and coherent proposals to address selected issues or opportunities in complex contexts.
Analysis and evaluation	Critically analyses and evaluates the reliability, validity and significance of in-depth data and evidence, selecting effective principles, frameworks, criteria and techniques to support conclusions in complex and inter-related contexts.

Practical skills

Organisation and communication of information	Organises and communicates specialist and inter-related information, using selected criteria, to audiences in complex contexts.
Interpersonal, team and networking skills	Applies and develops selected interpersonal, team and networking skills to enhance team performance in complex and inter-related contexts and engages with relevant professional communities.
Project and activity design and development skills	Designs and develops specialist projects and/or activities to enhance inter-related areas of own and/or others learning, work or practice in complex contexts.

Behaviours and values

Ethical awareness and application	Applies an in-depth awareness of specialist ethical and professional values and codes of conduct to personal and/or group decisions, actions, responsibilities and outcomes within complex and inter-related contexts.
Personal responsibility and leadership	Takes responsibility for the critical evaluation of own and others' capabilities and development using selected management approaches in complex and inter-related contexts.

seec descriptors: by level

Level 7

Summary credit level descriptor	
Applies a systematic understanding of areas of knowledge and advanced skills in abstract and unpredictably complex learning, work or practice contexts. Acts autonomously to make strategic decisions taking responsibility for outcomes and for leading the systematic and critical evaluation of own and others' capabilities, performance and development. Uses specialist techniques, advanced methodologies and criteria to systematically analyse, evaluate, organise and communicate incomplete and/or contradictory information and data. Designs and develops advanced specialist projects and/or activities to strategically enhance own and/or others learning, work or practice.	
Setting	
Operational context	Operates in abstract and unpredictably complex learning, work or practice contexts, requiring selection and application of advanced and specialist techniques and information sources.
Autonomy and responsibility for actions	Acts autonomously to make strategic decisions and develops appropriate practice guidelines, taking responsibility for outcomes in abstract and unpredictably complex contexts.
Application of knowledge and understanding	
Knowledge and understanding	Applies a systematic understanding of knowledge and specialist theoretical and methodological approaches, suggesting and incorporating interrelationships with other relevant disciplines in abstract and unpredictably complex contexts.
Cognitive skills	
Conceptualisation and critical thinking	Selects and applies advanced principles, concepts, theoretical frameworks and approaches to critically develop systematic responses to existing discourses and methodologies, suggesting new ideas in unpredictably complex contexts.
Problem solving and enquiry	Selects and adapts appropriate advanced problem-solving strategies, methods and techniques to design systematic investigations that define and critically evaluate problems, using specialist information and data in unpredictable and complex contexts.
Synthesis and creativity	Systematically synthesises advanced and specialist information and ideas and formulates and develops innovative proposals to address strategic issues or opportunities in unpredictably complex contexts.
Analysis and evaluation	Systematically and critically analyses and evaluates, incomplete and/or contradictory data and evidence, developing effective and advanced methodologies to explain and support conclusions and recommendations in unpredictably complex contexts.
Practical skills	
Organisation and communication of information	Systematically organises and communicates advanced information, using criteria developed for specialist audiences in unpredictably complex contexts.
Interpersonal, team and networking skills	Applies and develops advanced interpersonal, team and networking skills to strategically enhance team performance in unpredictably complex contexts and contributes to specialist professional communities.
Project and activity design and development skills	Designs and develops advanced specialist projects and/or activities to strategically enhance own and/or others learning, work or practice within unpredictably complex contexts.
Behaviours and values	
Ethical awareness and application	Systematically applies an advanced awareness of ethical and professional values and codes of conduct, to personal and strategic decisions, actions, responsibilities, outcomes and dilemmas, whilst working proactively with others to suggest and advocate appropriate solutions in unpredictably complex contexts.
Personal responsibility and leadership	Takes responsibility for leading the systematic and critical evaluation of own and others' capabilities, performance and development, applying strategic management approaches in unpredictably complex contexts.

seec descriptors: by level

Level 8

Summary credit level descriptor	
Applies a comprehensive understanding of areas of knowledge and highly advanced skills in highly abstract and complex learning, work or practice contexts at the forefront of knowledge. Acts autonomously, often in a professional capacity, to make strategic decisions that drive and develop transformative initiatives. Uses highly advanced and specialist techniques to analyse, evaluate, organise and communicate information, data and evidence at the forefront of knowledge. Takes full accountability for the comprehensive and critical evaluation of own and others' capabilities, performance and development. Uses highly advanced methodologies to drive the production of new knowledge. Designs and develops highly advanced, specialist and innovative projects and/or activities to transform own and/or others learning, work or practice.	
Setting	
Operational context	Operates in highly abstract and complex learning, work or practice contexts at the forefront of knowledge requiring selection, development and innovative application of highly advanced and specialist techniques and information sources.
Autonomy and responsibility for actions	Acts autonomously to drive and develop transformative initiatives and guidelines, often in a professional capacity, with full accountability for self and others in highly abstract and complex contexts at the forefront of knowledge, work and practice.
Application of knowledge and understanding	
Knowledge and understanding	Applies a comprehensive understanding of knowledge, techniques and methodologies at the forefront of the discipline to drive the production of new knowledge in highly abstract and complex contexts.
Cognitive skills	
Conceptualisation and critical thinking	Develops and applies innovative and highly advanced principles, concepts, theoretical frameworks and approaches to critically produce a comprehensive and coherent discourse and methodology to underpin new ideas in highly abstract and complex contexts.
Problem solving and enquiry	Develops innovative and highly advanced problem-solving strategies, methods and techniques to design comprehensive investigations that critically evaluate problems to generate new information and data in highly abstract and complex contexts.
Synthesis and creativity	Comprehensively synthesises highly advanced and specialist information and ideas and formulates and develops new and transformative proposals to address and challenge issues or opportunities at the forefront of knowledge, in highly abstract and complex contexts.
Analysis and evaluation	Comprehensively and critically analyses and evaluates incomplete and/or contradictory data and evidence at the forefront of knowledge, developing innovative methodologies to explain, support, challenge and drive the production of new knowledge in highly complex contexts.
Practical skills	
Organisation and communication of information	Comprehensively organises and communicates new and highly advanced information using criteria at the forefront of knowledge, developed for specialist audiences in highly complex contexts.
Interpersonal, team and networking skills	Applies and develops highly advanced interpersonal, team and networking skills to transformatively enhance team performance in highly complex contexts and innovatively contributes to specialist professional communities.
Project and activity design and development skills	Designs and develops highly advanced, specialist and innovative projects and/or activities to transform own and/or others learning, work or practice in highly complex contexts.
Behaviours and values	
Ethical awareness and application	Comprehensively applies a highly advanced awareness of ethical and professional values and codes of conduct, as an accountable aspect of own professional practice and works transformatively with others to formulate and implement innovative solutions and value frameworks in highly complex contexts.
Personal responsibility and leadership	Leads and is accountable for the comprehensive and critical evaluation of own and others' capabilities, performance and development, applying innovative and transformative leadership approaches in highly complex contexts.

seec descriptors: comparative summary

Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8
Applies an understanding of pre-defined areas of knowledge and skills in familiar learning, work or practice contexts. Acts largely under direction; working within pre-defined guidelines and using predefined techniques. Takes responsibility for initiating and completing tasks as well as the evaluation of own capabilities. Uses pre-defined principles to analyse, evaluate, organise and communicate information. Develops projects and/or activities to support own and/or others learning, work and practice.	Applies an understanding of established areas of knowledge and skills in familiar and unfamiliar learning, work or practice contexts. Acts with support and uses techniques within established guidelines. Takes responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs and the evaluation of own capabilities and development. Uses established principles to analyse, evaluate, organise and communicate the relevance and significance of information. Develops projects and/or activities to inform own and/or others learning, work or practice.	Applies an understanding of wide-ranging areas of knowledge and a range of relevant skills in learning, work or practice contexts of varying complexity. Acts with partial self-direction and works within relevant guidelines using a wide range of techniques. Takes responsibility for achieving personal and/or group outcomes/outputs and evaluates own capabilities and development using relevant criteria. Uses a range of principles to analyse, evaluate, organise and communicate the reliability and validity of a variety of information sources. Develops a range of relevant projects and/or activities to improve areas of own and/or others learning, work or practice.	Applies an in-depth understanding of areas of knowledge and relevant selected specialist skills in complex and interrelated learning, work or practice contexts. Acts autonomously and works within relevant self-selected guidelines using specialist techniques. Takes responsibility for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes and for the critical evaluation of own and others' capabilities and development. Selects relevant specialist strategies and principles to analyse, evaluate, organise and communicate the significance of information and data in complex contexts. Designs and develops specialist projects and/or activities to enhance inter-related areas of own and/or others learning.	Applies a systematic understanding of areas of knowledge and advanced skills in abstract and unpredictably complex learning, work or practice contexts. Acts autonomously to make strategic decisions taking responsibility for outcomes and for leading the systematic and critical evaluation of own and others' capabilities, performance and development. Uses specialist techniques, advanced methodologies and criteria to systematically analyse, evaluate, organise and communicate incomplete and/or contradictory information and data. Designs and develops advanced specialist projects and/or activities to strategically enhance own and/or others learning, work or practice.	Applies a comprehensive understanding of areas of knowledge and highly advanced skills in highly abstract and complex learning, work or practice contexts at the forefront of knowledge. Acts autonomously, often in a professional capacity, to make strategic decisions that drive and develop transformative initiatives. Uses highly advanced and specialist techniques to analyse, evaluate, organise and communicate information, data and evidence at the forefront of knowledge. Takes full accountability for the comprehensive and critical evaluation of own and others' capabilities, performance and development. Uses highly advanced methodologies to drive the production of new knowledge. Designs and develops highly advanced, specialist and innovative projects and/or activities to transform own and/or others learning, work or practice.

	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8
Setting						
Operational context	Operates in familiar learning, work or practice contexts that require the use of predefined techniques and information sources.	Operates in familiar and unfamiliar learning, work or practice contexts that require the use of established techniques and information sources.	Operates in learning, work or practice contexts of varying complexity requiring the application of a wide range of techniques and information sources.	Operates in complex and inter-related learning, work or practice contexts, requiring selection and application of relevant specialist techniques and information sources.	Operates in abstract and unpredictably complex learning, work or practice contexts, requiring selection and application of advanced and specialist techniques and information sources.	Operates in highly abstract and complex learning, work or practice contexts at the forefront of knowledge requiring selection, development and innovative application of highly advanced and specialist techniques and information sources.
Autonomy and responsibility for actions	Acts largely under direction, within predefined guidelines, taking responsibility for initiating and completing tasks and procedures in familiar contexts.	Acts with support within established guidelines and takes responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.	Acts with partial self-direction within relevant guidelines and accepts responsibility for achieving personal and/or group outcomes/outputs in wide-ranging contexts of varying complexity.	Acts autonomously within relevant selfselected guidelines, taking responsibility for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes in complex and interrelated contexts.	Acts autonomously to make strategic decisions and develops appropriate practice guidelines, taking responsibility for outcomes in abstract and unpredictably complex contexts.	Acts autonomously to drive and develop transformative initiatives and guidelines, often in a professional capacity, with full accountability for self and others in highly abstract and complex contexts at the forefront of knowledge, work and practice.
Application of knowledge and understanding						
Knowledge and understanding	Applies an understanding of pre-defined areas of knowledge and an awareness of theories, ideas, concepts and related debates in familiar contexts.	Applies an understanding of established areas of knowledge and an appreciation of where theories, ideas and concepts are open to ongoing debate and reformulation in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.	Applies an understanding of wide-ranging areas of knowledge, recognising those areas where theories, ideas and concepts are most/ least secure in contexts of varying complexity.	Applies an in-depth understanding of knowledge, selecting relevant and specialist theories, ideas, conceptual frameworks and methods in complex and interrelated contexts.	Applies a systematic understanding of knowledge and specialist theoretical and methodological approaches, suggesting and incorporating interrelationships with other relevant disciplines in abstract and unpredictably complex contexts.	Applies a comprehensive understanding of knowledge, techniques and methodologies at the forefront of the discipline to drive the production of new knowledge in highly abstract and complex contexts.

	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8
Cognitive skills						
Conceptualisation and critical thinking	Identifies and applies pre-defined principles, concepts, theoretical frameworks and approaches in familiar contexts.	Identifies and applies established principles, concepts, theoretical frameworks and approaches, recognising their relative strengths in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.	Identifies and applies a range of relevant principles, concepts, theoretical frameworks and approaches recognising competing perspectives in contexts of varying complexity.	Selects and applies relevant specialist principles concepts, theoretical frameworks and approaches from competing perspectives and critically identifies the possibility of new ideas in complex and inter-related contexts.	Selects and applies advanced principles, concepts, theoretical frameworks and approaches to critically develop systematic responses to existing discourses and methodologies, suggesting new ideas in unpredictably complex contexts.	Develops and applies innovative and highly advanced principles, concepts, theoretical frameworks and approaches to critically produce a comprehensive and coherent discourse and methodology to underpin new ideas in highly abstract and complex contexts.
Problem-solving and enquiry	Applies pre-defined problem-solving techniques to investigate given problems using information and data in familiar contexts.	Applies established problem-solving methods and techniques to recognise and investigate problems, using information and data in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.	Applies a range of relevant problemsolving methods and techniques to define and investigate problems, patterns and relationships using information and data in contexts of varying complexity.	Selects and applies specialist problemsolving strategies, methods and techniques to define, investigate and critically evaluate problems using information and data in complex and interrelated contexts.	Selects and adapts appropriate advanced problem-solving strategies, methods and techniques to design systematic investigations that define and critically evaluate problems, using specialist information and data in unpredictable and complex contexts.	Develops innovative and highly advanced problem-solving strategies, methods and techniques to design comprehensive investigations that critically evaluate problems to generate new and information and data in highly abstract and complex contexts.
Synthesis and creativity	Synthesises information and ideas and formulates creative proposals to address pre-defined issues or opportunities in familiar contexts.	Synthesises information and ideas and formulates creative proposals to address established issues or opportunities in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.	Synthesises Information and ideas and formulates creative proposals to address a range of issues or opportunities in contexts of varying complexity.	Synthesises specialist and inter-related information and ideas and formulates and develops creative and coherent proposals to address selected issues or opportunities in complex contexts.	Systematically synthesises advanced and specialist information and ideas and formulates and develops innovative proposals to address strategic issues or opportunities in and unpredictably complex contexts.	Comprehensively synthesises highly advanced and specialist information and ideas and formulates and develops new and transformative proposals to address and challenge issues or opportunities at the forefront of knowledge, in highly abstract and complex contexts.

	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8
Cognitive skills (continued)						
Analysis and evaluation	Analyses and evaluates the relevance of information and data using pre-defined principles, frameworks, criteria and techniques in familiar contexts.	Analyses and evaluates the relevance and significance of information and data using established principles, frameworks, criteria and techniques in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.	Analyses and evaluates the reliability and validity of a variety of information and data sources, using and comparing a range of principles, frameworks, criteria and techniques in contexts of varying complexity.	Critically analyses and evaluates the reliability, validity and significance of in-depth data and evidence, selecting effective principles, frameworks, criteria and techniques to support conclusions in complex and interrelated contexts.	Systematically and critically analyses and evaluates, incomplete and/or contradictory data and evidence, developing effective and advanced methodologies to explain and support conclusions and recommendations in unpredictably complex contexts.	Comprehensively and critically analyses and evaluates incomplete and/or contradictory data and evidence at the forefront of knowledge, developing innovative methodologies to explain, support, challenge and drive the production of new knowledge in highly complex contexts.
Practical skills						
Organisation and communication of information	Organises and communicates information, using pre-defined criteria, to audiences in familiar contexts.	Organises and communicates information, using established criteria, to audiences in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.	Organises and communicates information, using a range of relevant criteria, to a variety of audiences in contexts of varying complexity.	Organises and communicates specialist and interrelated information, using selected criteria, to selected audiences in complex contexts.	Systematically organises and communicates advanced information, using criteria developed for specialist audiences in unpredictably complex contexts.	Comprehensively organises and communicates new and highly advanced information using criteria at the forefront of knowledge, developed for specialist audiences in highly complex contexts.
Interpersonal, team and networking skills	Applies pre-defined interpersonal, team and networking skills to support team performance in familiar contexts.	Applies established interpersonal, team and networking skills to recognise factors that affect team performance in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.	Applies a range of relevant interpersonal, team and networking skills to contribute to the enhancement of team performance in contexts of varying complexity.	Applies and develops selected interpersonal, team and networking skills to enhance team performance in complex and interrelated contexts and engages with relevant professional communities.	Applies and develops advanced interpersonal, team and networking skills to strategically enhance team performance in unpredictably complex contexts and contributes to specialist professional communities.	Applies and develops highly advanced interpersonal, team and networking skills to transformatively enhance team performance in highly complex contexts and innovatively contributes to specialist professional communities.

	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8
Practical skills (continued)						
Project and activity design and development skills	Designs and develops projects and/or activities using predefined criteria to support own and/ or others learning, work or practice in familiar contexts.	Designs and develops projects and/ or activities using established criteria to inform own and/ or others learning. Work or practice in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.	Designs and develops a range of relevant projects and/or activities to improve areas of own and/ or others learning, work or practice of varying complexity.	Designs and develops specialist projects and/ or activities to enhance inter-related areas of own and/ or others learning, work or practice in complex contexts.	Designs and develops advanced specialist projects and/or activities to strategically enhance own and/ or others learning, work or practice within unpredictably complex contexts.	Designs and develops highly advanced, specialist and innovative projects and/or activities to transform own and/ or others learning, work or practice in highly complex contexts.
Behaviours and values						
Ethical awareness and application	Applies an awareness of pre-defined ethical values and issues to personal decisions and actions in familiar contexts.	Applies an awareness of established ethical values and issues to personal decisions, actions and responsibilities in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.	Applies an awareness of a range of relevant ethical and professional values and codes of conduct to personal and/ or group decisions, actions, responsibilities and outcomes in contexts of varying complexity.	Applies an in-depth awareness of specialist ethical and professional values and codes of conduct to personal and/ or group decisions, actions, responsibilities and outcomes within complex and interrelated contexts.	Systematically applies an advanced awareness of ethical and professional values and codes of conduct, to personal and strategic decisions, actions, responsibilities, outcomes and dilemmas, whilst working proactively with others to suggest and advocate appropriate solutions in unpredictably complex contexts.	Comprehensively applies a highly advanced awareness of ethical and professional values and codes of conduct, as an accountable aspect of own professional practice and works transformatively with others to formulate and implement innovative solutions and value frameworks in highly complex contexts.
Personal responsibility and leadership	Takes responsibility for the evaluation of own capabilities using pre-defined criteria in familiar contexts.	Takes responsibility for the evaluation of own capabilities and development using established criteria in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.	Takes responsibility for the evaluation of own and/ or others' capabilities and development using wide-ranging approaches and criteria in contexts of varying complexity.	Takes responsibility for the critical evaluation of own and others' capabilities and development using selected management approaches in complex and interrelated contexts.	Takes responsibility for leading the systematic and critical evaluation of own and others' capabilities, performance and development, applying strategic management approaches in unpredictably complex contexts.	Leads and is accountable for the comprehensive and critical evaluation of own and others' capabilities, performance and development, applying innovative and transformative leadership approaches in highly complex contexts.

Appendices

Historical note

The **seec** credit level descriptors were first published in 1996 (Credit Guidelines, Models and Protocols; DfEE 1996), having been developed by colleagues from **seec** institutions in collaboration with representatives from member institutions of the Higher Education Credit Initiative Wales (HECIW). In 2001/2 they were revised to reflect the four skills categories adopted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) building on the areas identified in the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing Report, 1997):

- Development of knowledge and understanding
- Cognitive/intellectual skills
- Key/transferable skills
- Practical skills

Much of the work for that revision was undertaken by colleagues at the, then, Anglia Polytechnic University and by a **seec** working group.

In 2009 **seec** undertook a review of member institutions' use of the credit level descriptors which showed they had generally been embedded within institutional frameworks and provided a useful reference source. However, extended experience of the use of credit, particularly in relation to work-based learning and accreditation, suggested the need to review the descriptors to more clearly reference higher-level learning in these contexts and to ensure that they remained appropriate for likely future developments. A **seec** working group produced revised descriptors in 2010, which were further reviewed through consultation with members and their representatives.

The 2016 edition of the credit level descriptors reflected some changes in the higher education sector and updated weblinks. Only minor editorial amendments were made to the 2010 descriptors, at this time.

This edition of the credit level descriptors (2021) represents a more substantive review of the descriptors which is reflective of some significant changes that have taken place and aligns with further contemporary developments. Examples of these developments range from the advent of microcredentials to the design, development and delivery of degree apprenticeships. Recent years have seen a re-emergence of the recognition of the importance of credit as a powerful means to enhance flexibility and transferability of higher learning to meet the increasingly diverse needs of learners, employers and PSRBs. This edition of the descriptors is intended to ensure they continue to support innovation in practice and that they are as useful as possible to higher education providers, practitioners, employers and learners in the context of ongoing changes to the provision of higher education.

We are indebted to practitioners who have contributed to the development of the descriptors over the past 25 years.

Abbreviations

CQFW	Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
FHEQ	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications
FQ-EHEA	Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area
HE	Higher Education
HECF	Higher Education Credit Framework for England
PSRBS	Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
RPL	Recognition of prior learning
RQF	Regulated Qualifications Framework
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
WHECC	Welsh Higher Education Credit Consortium

Glossary

Apprenticeship

A job with training to industry and/or professional standards, which may or may not include a mandatory qualification.

Assessment regulations

The rules governing assessment of a programme of study including marking scheme, pass mark, requirements for progression to subsequent levels or stages of a programme and award and classification requirements (for instance in terms of credits to be achieved and specific marks to be attained).

Credit

Credit is awarded to a learner in recognition of the verified achievement of designated learning outcomes at a specified level.

Credit accumulation

A process of achieving credits over time in relation to a planned programme of study.

Credit level

An indicator of the relative challenge, complexity and depth of learning and of learner autonomy.

Credit level descriptors

The generic or transdisciplinary statements of the outcomes of learning at a specific academic level, used as reference points.

Credit transfer

A mechanism which allows credit awarded by a higher education (HE) awarding body to be recognised, quantified and included towards the credit requirements for a programme of study delivered by another HE provider and/or between programmes offered by a HE provider. Each HE awarding body determines what credit it will accept in relation to its individual programmes.

Credit value

The number of credits, at a particular level, assigned to a body of learning. The number of credits is based on the estimated notional learning hours (where one credit represents 10 notional hours of learning).

CATS (Credit Accumulation and Transfer System)

A system which enables learners to accumulate credit, and which facilitates the transfer of that credit within and between education providers.

Higher and Degree Apprenticeships

Higher apprenticeships are apprenticeships at level 4 to 7 that do not include a mandatory degree qualification but may or may not include another qualification. Degree apprenticeships are apprenticeships at levels 6 or 7 that must include a Bachelors with Honours or Masters degree as a mandatory qualification.

Learning outcomes

Statement of the learning that a learner is expected to be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning.

Microcredentials

Typically, short courses, or component elements of larger courses (but smaller than FHEQ qualifications) which may or may not be certified as credit bearing. For the purposes of the Credit Framework for England, microcredentials are awarded by a body with the powers to award academic credit and are quality assured and mapped against the Credit Framework levels.

Module/unit

A self-contained, formally structured and bounded learning experience with a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes, assessment requirements and criteria.

Notional learning hours

The number of hours which it is expected that a learner will need to spend, on average, to achieve specified learning outcomes for a programme or module.

Qualification descriptors

Generic statements of the outcomes of study associated with a specific qualification. They provide clear points of reference that describe the main outcomes of a qualification (QAA, 2014).

Recognition of prior learning (RPL)

The identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of prior learning and achievement. This may be certificated learning and/or prior experiential learning, where learning achieved outside education or training systems is assessed and recognised for academic purposes.

About seec

Formed in 1985, **seec** operated independently until 2020 and is now a Network of the University Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL).

Its members are practitioners and representatives from universities and higher education providers working together to advance the use and practice of academic credit, widening access to learning. Aligned with the UALL mission, the purpose of **seec** is to create learning opportunity through credit. **seec** aims 'to advance education for the public benefit by developing credit accumulation and transfer and promoting lifelong learning, at the higher education level'.

Since its formation in 1985², **seec** has served as a reference point on credit-based learning, structures and processes in the UK and in the developing field of European credit. It promotes links and collaborative ventures between our members, employers, professional bodies and other organisations with interests in credit, to open up market opportunities in the UK and internationally.

For more information, visit www.seec.org.uk

2. Originally the South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer, **seec** has grown to cover institutions throughout the UK and there is no geographical restriction on membership.

